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ABSTRACT

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Research on Remembering: Interrogation or Conversation, Monologue or Dialogue?[1]

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Abstract

The implications of the dialectical perspective for research methodology are reviewed and illustrated with examples from research on memory and memory development. Three conversations or dialogues are described: within the researcher, between the researcher and the research participants, and between the researcher and the social-historical context. Traditional research methodology can be strengthened by embedding it within these dialogues, thus giving greater emphasis to creativity and meaningfulness of research, to the protection and interests of research participants, and to the social responsibilities of the researcher.

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Research on Remembering: Interrogation or Conversation, Monologue or Dialogue?[1]

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Is research on remembering better characterized as an interrogation or conversation, as a monologue or dialogue? This question, which is the topic of this paper, is framed in this particular way for two reasons. First, the terms are derived from and will illustrate the dialectical perspective. Second, research methodology in psychology was elaborated initially within the context of learning and memory. If research methodology is to be criticized and changed, any suggestions for change must ultimately be applicable within this most fundamental research context. In this paper, three conversations or dialogues are described, within which researchers are potentially involved. The thrust of the paper is to strengthen traditional research methodology, by placing it within and subordinating it to these conversations or dialogues.

The dialectical perspective in psychology, as advanced by Riegel (1978) and others, has provided various criticisms of traditional research methodology. Unfortunately, these criticisms have often been assimilated to non-dialectical, either-or frameworks. Thus, either dialectics is understood as an argument against traditional methodology, in which case a call is made to demonstrate a superior methodology; or, failing to demonstrate a new methodology, dialectics is rejected as not different from currently existing methodology.

A more appropriate framework for consideration of the contributions of the dialectical perspective for research methodology is, however, that of dialectics itself. Within the dialectical perspective, one is not limited to relationships of either-or. Instead, theory and methodology may be conceptualized both as presenting contradictory demands--in a relationship of thesis and antithesis--and also as consistent--as the demands are integrated within a superordinate synthesis. Thus dialectics, although contrasting with and providing challenges to certain aspects of traditional research methodology, can, at the same time, provide a context within which to understand and strengthen traditional methodology.

The dialectical perspective may be summarized by referring to two basic principles: First, the primary emphasis is upon activity and continuing changes, rather than upon stability and permanence. Researchers and the objects of their research are merely temporary stabilities within the flow of activities from which they are derived. Second, dialectical models provide a significant role for social and historical contexts. The social-historical context is not merely a supportive context within which psychological activity, and research into that activity, may take place; instead, this context itself is an active force in the development of the individual and the elaboration of research methodology, and proceeds along an historical course in its own right (Meacham, 1977b).

Monologues and Dialogues

These principles may be made more concrete by providing some examples. One of the domains to which the dialectical perspective has been applied is that of social interactions or, to use a term I prefer, transactions[2] (Meacham, 1977a). In addition to the exchange of products and money,

one may also consider transactions involving the exchange of information or language products, for example, the conversation or dialogue, in which two persons alternate in speaking. As Riegel (1978, p. 52) has noted, dialogues may be described in terms of triangular units, in which one point of the triangle refers to the first speaker's statement or question; the second point of the triangle refers to the second speaker's statement or answer; and the third point refers to the next statement of the first speaker. This third statement is related not only to the immediately preceding statement of the other person, but also to the speaker's own preceding statement and thoughts. It is the task of each speaker to provide an integration or a synthesis of what has gone before, namely, both his or her own previous statement and the response of the other speaker, which stand in a contradictory relationship as thesis and antithesis.

As the conversation or dialogue continues, it may be described as a series of adjoining triangles, with the replies of the speakers in the first triangle providing the thesis and antithesis which are to be integrated by the replies in the following triangle. As long as the speech acts of both speakers provide an integration or synthesis of both the opponent's statements and the speaker's own preceding statements, the conversation will continue, and both speakers will continue to change. However, when this condition is not met--for example, when one of the speakers does not acknowledge the statements of the partner--then the conversation or dialogue degenerates into an uncoordinated monologue and a failure in communication. The speakers continue to speak at intervals, but the statements refer back only to each speaker's own preceding statements, and no consideration is given to the questions raised and the information provided by the potential partner in the dialogue.

There are, however, certain social situations for which we have come to regard the degenerate conversation or dialogue--i.e., the triangle with not all the relations implied by the sides complete--as appropriate. One of these situations is that of interrogation, as, for example, in the interrogation by the authorities of a person suspected of having committed a crime. Because the transaction serves the interests of only one of the participants, the construction and exchange of information are not maximized as would be the case in a conversation. Indeed, the suspect may refuse to reveal to the questioner information which could contribute to the outcome of the transaction. Much more likely is that the suspect will simply remain confused, for the questions which are posed are grounded in only the preceding questions and thoughts of the examiner and may indeed be intended to disclose as little information as possible to the suspect. From the examiner's point of view, an interrogation is designed to extract new information from the suspect while at the same time providing as little information as possible to the suspect. Additional examples of degenerate forms of the conversation may be mentioned briefly: the examination process in schools, during which the student typically learns little; and formal presentations such as the present one, in which the author must assume the difficult task of anticipating and replying to the questions which may be emerging in the minds of the readers.

Although the construction and exchange of information are the greatest in those transactions which conform to the full dialogue or conversation form, nevertheless, the paradigm for our research activities--at least that in which many of us conceive of our activities, and in which many of us are instructing our students--is the paradigm of

interrogation, and not conversation, of monologue, and not dialogue. We seek answers to our research questions by interrogating our subject matter, but we do not provide information to our subject matter or permit questions to be addressed to ourselves by the research participants, for we might by so doing "bias" the answers which are yielded to us. In the remainder of my presentation, however, I will argue that what we do as researchers should not be conceived simply as a monologue or interrogation. Instead, our activities can be more appropriately described from a dialectical perspective as a conversation or dialogue. Nevertheless, our research methodology does not yet conform sufficiently to the structure of a dialogue or conversation.

The Subjective-Objective Dialogue

The first of three principal conversations or dialogues within which researchers are involved is the relationship between the researcher's subjective and objective domains. The subjective or personal domain refers to the researcher's intuitions, values, and practical activities; the objective domain refers to those beliefs which have been validated through the agreement of many observers and through the coherence of those beliefs among themselves. Researchers in the social sciences have struggled to split apart the subjective from the objective domains, casting aside the former and retaining the latter in its "purity." In this manner, we have attempted to guard against our biases or prior interpretations as researchers, and we have hoped to increase the generalizability of our conclusions. But by forcing ourselves to choose either subjectivity or objectivity, we have given up the positive benefits of a dialogue or conversation between these two domains. From a

dialectical perspective, one recognizes the conflict between the subjective and objective, between the synthesis and the antithesis; but rather than choosing one over the other, one ought to understand the relationship of the two within a higher-order synthesis.

As an example, my students and I have been investigating a category of remembering behaviors which we have termed prospective remembering. Prospective remembering refers to the remembering of memories that have implications for actions to be performed in the future, such as stopping at the store or keeping an appointment. Prospective remembering, which involves memories from the past but not necessarily about the past, can be distinguished from retrospective remembering, which is the recall of memories about the past. Remembering to lock the doors at night can be distinguished from remembering whether or not one has locked the doors. This research program (Meacham & Dumitru, 1976; Meacham & Leiman, 1975; Meacham & Singer, 1977) developed out of my perception that a great proportion of my own practical remembering activity is of the prospective type--appointments, deadlines, commitments--rather than the retrospective type. In addition, adults' reflections on their own and their children's memory lapses often seem more concerned with instances of forgetting to carry out actions, than with the forgetting of information about the past. The point is that a complete description of my research methodology requires attention to both the subjective and the objective domains.[3]

The subjective domain provides the context for the processes of discovery and creativity, in the recognition of contradiction and in the

decision to invest time and effort in pursuing a particular hypothesis. At the same time, the subjective impressions are made concrete through their validation in the objective domain. The objective studies derive their meaning from their relationship to the intuitions and the practical activities of the researcher. Because in much contemporary research on remembering the dialogue between the subjective and the objective is no longer permitted, this research often lacks social and historical significance. The traditional paradigm for research on remembering--determination of the amount that can be recalled some period of time following presentation of the material--was meaningful and appropriate at a time in history when rapid printing of books, technology for copying, and information-retrieval systems were not yet available to reduce our dependence upon retrospective remembering, and when information committed by rote to memory did not become obsolete in a short period of time (Meacham, 1972).

The potential value of dialectics as a metaphor (Riegel & Meacham, in press) should not be overlooked, although the implications for research methodology are perhaps somewhat indirect. The notions of continuing change, and the thesis-antithesis-synthesis framework, have not yet been utilized as models in the social sciences as fully as possible. Elsewhere (Meacham, 1976), I have suggested that the view that memories are valuable to the extent that they are entirely accurate and permanent--factors which are typically measured in memory research--is paradoxical, given the widespread agreement that we alter and distort our memories to suit our present motivations. In addition, our primary means of

validating memories is not through assessing their correspondence with the past, but rather by determining whether they provide information which is useful or appropriate in the present. In short, a dialectical model of memories would emphasize the changing nature of memories, rather than their accuracy and permanence (see Meacham, 1977a, for an outline of such a dialectical model of remembering). As a second example of the use of dialectics as a metaphor, Keller (1978) has proposed a new conceptualization of Erikson's ego integrity versus despair crisis of late adulthood, according to which ego integrity is redefined as a synthesis of opposing issues and attitudes. Of several measures of ego integrity, this synthesis measure was most strongly related to the other variables in an interview study with fifty older adults.

The Researcher-Participant Dialogue

The second of the three dialogues is that between the researcher and the participants in the research study. In a dialogue or conversation, both participants contribute to and change during the course of the transaction; in a monologue or interrogation, change is minimal and no new information is created. When one considers change in the research participants, a central consideration must be that of research ethics. Within the context of a traditional, non-dialectical research methodology, research ethics is unfortunately regarded as merely a peripheral issue, for the assumption is that the research participant is merely observed but is not changed during the course of the investigation. From a dialectical perspective, however, both the participants in a dialogue or conversation are constantly changing, and so issues of invasion of

privacy, informed consent, confidentiality, protection from harm, and direct benefits of the research to the participants are paramount.

In addition, our research methodology in the area of remembering has been designed to impede the active involvement of the participants in the research activity. Let me illustrate by citing an often-quoted sentence from Woodworth and Schlosberg's (1954) textbook on Experimental Psychology: "Such aids in memorizing [as relying on familiar items and patterns] are naturally regarded with much favor by O [the organism], but E [the experimenter] would like to be rid of them. They make the learning task less uniform and introduce variability and unreliability into the quantitative results. Besides, E wants to study the formation of new associations, not O's clever utilization of old ones" (p. 708). This research methodology, one in which the researcher maintains the initiative in interrogating the research participants, deciding the value of the research, and limiting the ways in which the research participants may respond--a monologue and not a dialogue--prevented us for several decades from understanding that people when they memorize engage in a variety of activities such as organizing, labeling, rehearsing, visual and verbal elaboration, etc. (Hagen, Meacham, & Mesibov, 1970; Meacham, 1972). Riegel (1975) has argued that efforts to separate the researcher from the research participant destroy the very basis upon which psychological inquiries rest.

The research methodology of interrogation may have disastrous consequences when applied to assess the abilities of older and disadvantaged persons (Riegel, 1978, p. 150). Neither the researchers nor the older persons are able to do their best--the researcher is insecure because of his young age and the revival of previous parent-child relationships;

the older person is insecure and afraid to reveal potential deficiencies. Riegel has suggested that the solution is to treat both the researcher and the older person as equals--as they would be in a dialogue or conversation--by giving the researcher credit for the good performance of the older persons, as well as the participants receiving credit for their own performance. The assessment of performance is now a cooperative dialogue, and likely to be more productive, rather than a one-sided, competitive interrogation.

The research methodology of interrogation, rather than conversation, has retarded the investigation of autobiographical recall (Meacham & Perrotta, 1978). There can be little doubt that autobiographical recall or reminiscing is extremely important in the construction and maintenance of self-concept and identity, and perhaps in the establishment of ego integrity in late adulthood and old age (Meacham, 1977). Yet until recently there has been little consideration of the processes which may be involved in such remembering activity. The lack of attention to this topic derives from the incompatibility of a research paradigm which calls for the participant to remain unchanged, with a remembering process which by its nature can be expected to have an impact upon the participant's self-image.

Up to this point, my attention has been on the extent to which the research participant is expected or permitted to change during the course of the research activity. One may ask similar questions about the researcher: What is the criterion for deciding that sufficient data have been gathered so as to accept a hypothesis as valid, or to

abandon a line of research as unlikely to ever be fruitful? These questions are rarely discussed, because in our traditional research paradigm the researcher is also not expected to be changeable, just as the research participant does not change. I must step outside the area of memory research in order to cite a positive example, and that is from Skinner's well-known article, "A case history in scientific method." Skinner (1956) gives as a first principle of scientific research: "When you run onto something interesting, drop everything else and study it" (p. 222).

The Researcher-Society Dialogue

The last of the three dialogues is that which relates the researcher to society at large. The issue here is social action and responsibility for the consequences of one's research activities. One research finding on remembering with potential implications for public policy was the suggestion by Kagan and Klein (1973), based upon data from selected groups of children in Guatemala and in the Boston area, that "recall and recognition memory are basic cognitive functions that seem to mature in a regular way in a natural environment" (p. 955). They had found that what appeared to be differences in performance between the two groups at an earlier age, were considerably reduced at a later age. At the time of their first report, there were many who were concerned that data such as these, attributing a strong role to maturational patterns as opposed to environmental shaping in development, could be used as an argument for reducing the federal government's responsibilities in the area of preschool education.

Unfortunately, the finding of either similarities or differences along a single dimension--e.g., recognition memory for pictures--in cross-cultural research is open to numerous interpretations. I subsequently carried out a study in Guatemala (Meacham, 1975) showing the dependence of the pattern of children's memory abilities upon the specific social and historical conditions within which the children develop. Studies by Reese (1975), showing the impact of "Sesame Street" upon the development of children's ability to use imagery in paired-associate learning, and by Wagner (1974), who demonstrated the impact of formal education upon the development of the ability to rehearse while remembering, are consistent with my position. The point is that even research in an area as basic as that of remembering can have social action implications; certainly these implications are greater in many other areas of psychology.

The relationship between the researcher and the social context ought to be seen as a dialogue or conversation. The researcher's actions--and, to the same extent, lack of actions--have an impact upon the social context. Similarly, the social context influences researchers--their choice of questions to pursue, their choice of research methodology, and their interpretations of the data. Kvale (1975), for example, has argued that the traditional paradigm for research on remembering has been based upon the task requirements for individual workers on industrial assembly lines. Hultsch and Hickey (1978) have provided an excellent review of the issue of external validity--generalizability of research findings beyond the immediate experiment--from both a non-dialectical and a dialectical perspective. From the latter perspective, concerns for external validity assume priority over construct, internal, and statistical conclusion validity.

Conclusions

In closing, let me address the question, what is the uniqueness of the dialectical perspective in the description of these three dialogues or conversations--within the researcher, between the researcher and the participants, and between the researcher and the social-historical context? The dialectical perspective permits us to not have to choose one of the partners in each dialogue over the other, to not have to accept objectivity, an authoritarian stance as a researcher, and social isolation, while rejecting creativity and meaningfulness, the interests of the research participants, and social responsibility. From a dialectical perspective, each of these derives its meaning from its relationship with the other. It is the continual tension between these theses and antitheses which provides movement within a program of research.

Practically speaking, what does one do with this framework which has been presented? We ought to broaden our concepts of and our teaching of research methodology, to include not merely sampling procedures, experimental design, etc., but also an examination of the researcher's involvement in the three dialogues which were outlined: In particular, although we and our students are keen on testing and rejecting hypotheses, we too often have little sense for how to generate meaningful hypotheses for potential validation. Second, no doubt there are few graduate programs in which more than a few hours of instruction are required on the interests of and the protection of research participants. Third, we and our students often have insufficient regard for how our research is influenced by our own developmental histories and by the times in which we live, nor do we appreciate the extent to which our own actions--or lack of acting--can change that social context.

Still, one may argue what has been said leaves traditional research methodology intact. Nevertheless, it has been embedded within a broader context which deemphasizes the significance attached to traditional research methodology. Of course, one may do this without dialectics, but the rationale for the task is easier to apprehend from a dialectical perspective. Dialectics makes apparent the need to attend to methodology, since methodology is not neutral, but mediates between the researcher and that which becomes known. From a dialectical perspective, research methodology is more important than from a non-dialectical perspective. Let me illustrate this with a different metaphor: How many children have pulled the wings from a butterfly, hoping to discover in so doing what makes it fly, but have not found the explanation in the scattered pieces? The understanding of how the butterfly flies would come only from successfully reassembling the butterfly. Similarly, in the history of our research methodology, we have stripped away the various aspects--the researcher's intuitions, the participant's activity, the social-historical context, etc.--so as to have a pure, objective method. But this defining of the theses and antitheses has been only a first, essential step; the ultimate success of our research methodology depends upon the reassembly and coordination of all the aspects within a dynamic synthesis.

Footnotes

[1]In D. F. Hultsch (Chair), Implications of a dialectical perspective for research methodology. Symposium presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, August 1978. Many of the ideas in this paper arose in discussions at the Fourth Dialectical Psychology Conference, Shimer College, Mt. Carroll, Illinois, June 1977. In addition, I wish to thank Marilyn Zivian for her critical reading of an earlier draft.

[2]These two terms may be distinguished as follows: Interaction assumes elements which can be located and described independently of one another. Inquiries can then be made into the relationship between these elements, that is, the manner in which each element acts causally upon others. The term transaction, on the other hand, refers to an assumed activity, from which elements are derived as secondary categories. Buyer and seller are examples of elements which depend for their definition upon a prior assumption of a transactional activity. Once an activity of exchange is assumed, then buyer and seller may be defined easily as the elements derived from a reciprocal and permanent exchange; borrower and lender may be defined as the elements derived from a one-way, temporary exchange; and thief and victim by a one-way, permanent exchange (Meacham, 1977a).

[3]I have extended this theme of prospective remembering in interpreting some data on relationships between verbal and motor actions in a Luria-type task. The data are consistent with the view that the development of remembering abilities in very young children derives from their attempts to remember the goals of future actions, rather than information about the past (Meacham, 1978, in press).

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